

Us vs. Them: Dividing God's images into pieces

About every decade or so, the U.S. politics encounter outcries for "immigration reforms." Major changes in immigration laws occurred in 1980, 1990, 1996 and possibly will again in early 2006. During these seasons, politicians and radio talkshow hosts fan up the national debates on "immigration reform" based often on inflammatory, inaccurate or exaggerated statements.

Broad generalization and accusations of foreigners are often aired loudly to rally support for so-called immigration reforms. Sometimes this results in more than a political campaign, and develops into demonstrations like the Minutemen Project, or even into violence and murder against those who look foreign. We hear just about everything: "Oh, those Mexicans come here and eat up all our tax dollars on welfare"; "Oh, those illegal aliens have lots of kids who go to our public schools and drag our children down to their level"; "Oh, those Chinese have flu and those Africans have AIDS, so we should deport them all"; "Mexicans are just here to steal all our jobs and send all the money back to Mexico and won't even pay American taxes"; "They're all drug dealers"; "Stop immigration before our civilization and American Way of Life are destroyed"; "Lock 'em all up and deport 'em all cuz those Arabs and exchange students are terrorist risks"; "They come in and our cities get overpopulated, and they'll destroy our environment"; "I don't want those Mexicans next door -- they're lowering the value of my house"; "The Homeland Security can torture those Iraqi students -- they are just Iraqi enemy combatants, not Americans"; "What part of illegal don't these criminals understand? They have no rights to be here, and they have no rights to American judicial process," and on and on it goes, again just about for a couple of years every decade.

One of the most powerful and predominant rhetorical methods used by anti-immigration politicians is to give their audience an impression that the "aliens" are somehow different than "Americans," they do not deserve same rights as humans because they are less than humans, and they are automatically dangers to the nation solely because of not being born into the right country. Some of these politicians may even use Christian or biblical references.

Indeed, in the earlier history of Israel, God's chosen nation was said to have driven out Canaanites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites and Hittites, and God has given Israelites a divine assistance in committing what may be called today genocides. It is important, however, to read the Scriptures holistically. In prior to this invasion of Canaan, the Israelites lived in centuries of exile, slavery and oppression as "aliens" under the Egyptian imperialist hegemony. During their travel out of Egypt into freedom, Moses was said to have received the Torah, God's law, which explicitly states that one is not to oppress the strangers but treat them as if they are one's own; the same protection and rights under the same set of laws are to apply to the foreigners; and those foreigners who observe the law and join themselves to God are to be considered equals to native-born Israelites.

Throughout the history of Christianity, we see the dilemma between God who is the universal creator of all beings, and God who chooses certain people to be their own. The Bible seemingly presents both ideas in a quite contradictory way, from the Torah that excludes many groups of people from worship at the same time proudly proclaims, "Hear O Israel, Adonai our God is one God alone," to the New Testament epistles that on one hand say God's will is for all to be saved, yet at the same time claim that God has chosen some people to inherit the salvation but not the others.

But for now, let us not get into this.

What I would like us to consider is how we read the Scriptures and how we tend to let our own fear and insecurity take over the Word of God and hijack it to



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*Proper 15, Year A
Sunday, August 14, 2005*

By Sarah-Andrea Morrigan

*Genesis 45:1-15
Isaiah 56:1, 6-8
Psalm 133
Matthew 15:10-28
Romans 11:1, 2, 29-32*

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further that fear.

Our attitude towards people who are different from us is one of the common themes behind today's lectionary reading.

Behind the Isaiah passage [56:1, 6-8], we see the general development of the Jewish faith from one of tribalism to that of universalism. Throughout Isaiah and other prophetic literatures of the Hebrew Scriptures, God is portrayed as the sole ruler and creator of all universe who demands an equal, universal and unbiased justice for all. Challenging the nationalistic and xenophobic attitudes of the Jewish religious and political leaders, Isaiah delivers God's message that would have been shocking: "And the foreigners who join themselves to... [and] minister to [God], to love the name of [Yahweh] and to be [Yahweh's] servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant--these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar." (56:6, 7). This was spoken in the time when no self-respective person could claim that foreigners can be even on the holy mountain of God, let alone have their prayers heard. Do we hear something similar today? "Oh, God hates those Muslims" -- "The Lord Almighty does not hear the prayers of the Jews" -- "Those homosexuals are born to burn in hell; God does not listen to them, and they have no right to attend church or worship God" -- "Oh, yes, we have homeless in our neighbourhood; yes, we hand out sandwiches and even send volunteers to that shelter on Burnside. No, we don't invite them to our services, are you kidding?" Does any of these statements sound familiar? These are said often by well-meaning, very sincere Christians, as if the Muslims, Jews, gays and homeless people are sub-humans not made in God's image and thus do not qualify for God's love. But is any of us that great to decide on behalf of God the sovereign creator of all universe and stars and planets and organisms and peoples who is closer to the image of God, and who qualifies or disqualifies for God's grace? Doesn't this sound all like a height of blasphemy, as the apostle Peter learned: "You shall not call unclean what God has called clean"?

Today's Genesis [45:1-15] passage shows a moving reconciliation and forgiveness taking place between a guy who was different and his brothers who hated him so much that they wanted to kill him, only instead choosing to sell him to slavery for a quick, easy cash when they saw a travelling Egyptian trader.

Joseph, as you may be familiar with the story, was the more intuitive, spiritual, creative and artistic type, while the other brothers of the household were working macho guy types. They hated Joseph when their father treated Joseph better than the rest of the boys, and they hated Joseph even more because he began telling them about all these dreams he had. Does it sound like our culture's hostility towards "sissy boys," or as the governor of the State of California would say, "girlie-men"? Whether all this hostility came from the instinctive bully impulse in the young men, sexism, or from homophobia, we do not know. But one thing is for sure: these men feared that a brother of theirs who was unlike any of them (who, by the way, was the youngest boy also) was quickly gaining favour and power within a patriarchal family structure, and because of that they were threatened.

Fear of the different.

Instead of "vive la différence," their cry was "un mort rapide à la différence!" Quick death to the different, let's just get rid of this weirdo quickly.

Fast-forward to the Gospel reading. The Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' time was increasingly becoming hostile to Jesus and his teachings. They followed him around and hassled him, and spied on him to find any reason to press a criminal charge against him. Every time Jesus points out what is exactly on the minds of these conservative religious figures, they took an offence and got angry.

Fear of the different. A different and new way of showing God's kingdom was threatening the existing power base of the conservative religious authority.



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In Matthew 15:14, Jesus calls this a “blindness.” But what is this blindness? The verse 19 says, “For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.” And indeed these self-righteous religious conservatives had all the evil intentions, false witness and slander, eventually leading to a murder and more murders as they did not feel satisfied with the execution of Jesus alone, and began killing his followers left and right.

So the question here is, what does come out of our heart.

On the external, the religious leaders had all the right intentions. They were even “good” intentions. They wanted to maintain the integrity of doctrines and observances. They wanted to defend Judaism from every new idea that comes to town. They wanted to keep ordinary people from being misled.

But these concerns are generally on the head level.

Inside, on the heart level, these so-called “concerns” were nothing more than different ways of insulating themselves from the fear of unknown and unusual.

For example, a church board may decide to make hundreds of “new rules” before welcoming homeless people into some of their ministries, and even then try to steer the homeless people away from the core activities, including some of regular worship services. The board may even justify these actions with well-meaning and reasonably-sounding “concerns.” But on the deep inside, these rules are generated out of fear, ignorance, unfamiliarity and desire to maintain the comfortable status quo.

Likewise, much of what drives the immigration reform debates today sound logical and scientific, but nevertheless based on fear that translates to our desire to be insulated from the rest of the world, safely together with the people just like ourselves.

In either scenario, fear keeps us inside and inward, while love brings us outside and outward. Fear builds walls between people and communities. Love, on the other hand, tears down walls.

It is worth noting that the prophecy of Isaiah in the 56th chapter addresses the Israelites who are “outcast” and scattered into exile. They were themselves subject of other nations’ oppressions. Yet, God did not tell the Israelites to be patriotic, armed to teeth and round up the strangers and torture them in order to defend and regain their freedom. Unlike the popular post-9/11 American mentality, God admonishes Israel to do justice and even declared in their faces that foreigners are just as good as the people of Israel, and given opportunities they too can be part of God’s own people.

Fear is the worst blinder one can have. If fear of someone different from us keeps us away from learning about other cultures, languages, people or ideas, how boring could our lives become? Fear blindfolds two conflicting parties and breeds wars. Do you see this in action as you watch the world news? The extremist Islamic clerics peddle the fear that Americans and Europeans are wiping Islam off the face of the earth through imperialism, multinational capitalism and cultural dominance. The North Korean mass media portray their country as a nation under siege by Japan, South Korea and the U.S. The U.S. conservative ideology machines sell fear of another terror attack. Americans view anyone who looks Middle Eastern with suspicion and hatred, while Arabs view anyone who looks American with hostility and contempt. Until we all open our eyes, this so-called war on terror won’t end.

In the end, however, the prophets foresee a world where all people are united in peace as one, in a world where the law of love reigns.

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.” (Psalm 133:1). Bringing down the walls of separation built by fear means building up each other in love.



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